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NSC STAFF FOR WATERS

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON DETENTION OF MECA ACTIVISTS

REF: CAIRO 3256

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Three members of the Toronto-based Middle Eastern Christians Association (MECA) arrested on November 10 (ref) remain in custody. In a November 25 meeting, their lawyer expressed "cautious optimism" that they will be released soon. The lawyer also provided additional details regarding the arrests, including some excerpts from internet discussions that may have been the basis for the detentions. Post has raised the case on numerous occasions with GoE interlocutors, but we have not received an explanation of the charges or any prediction on the outcome of the case. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 25, we met with the lawyer, Ramzi El Naggar, and his son and partner, Peter. El Naggar said that the three had not yet been charged, but that a judge had extended the detention for an additional fifteen days. El Naggar said he is in regular contact with the public prosecutor investigating the case, and expressed "cautious optimism" that the three will be released, without charges, at the end of the current fifteen day period. If the three are released, El Naggar said the case will be held in abeyance, giving the prosecutor the option to file formal charges in the future.

¶3. (SBU) El Naggar provided additional information about the basis for the arrests. At least two of the three detainees engaged in religious discussions on the "Pal Talk" internet site. El Naggar acknowledged that some of the comments posted by his clients could be considered offensive by Muslims. In Naggar's office, we also listened to excerpts from the internet discussions, which were in Arabic. These included sexual and scatological references to Mohamed and his wife, Aisha. We were unable to download these discussions ourselves from the website and conclude they are no longer available. The audio stream downloaded by Naggar would indeed be incriminating under Egyptian law. The comments were made in the context of similar remarks by Muslim discussion participants regarding Christian religious figures.

¶4. (SBU) We have raised these arrests on numerous occasions with GoE interlocutors. On November 12, the DCM raised the case with Deputy Foreign Minister Wael Abdoulmagd. Abdoulmagd agreed to look into the case, but in a telephone conversation on November 25, he said he had no information. In a meeting on November 27, Abdoulmagd repeated that he still had no information. In a November 28 conversation, Abdoulmagd said that he had made appropriate inquiries but still had no information. Also on November 28, we raised the case with the State Security Investigative Services official responsible for human rights, Colonel Hisham Abdel Hamid. Abdel Hamid said that he was unable to comment on the case as it was now "in the hands" of the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Our Justice Attach will meet with the Public Prosecutor's deputy later this week and raise our concerns with that office as well.

15. (SBU) GoE motives in this case are unclear. Our GoE interlocutors recognize the attention this case has attracted. A Coptic political activist suggested to us that this may be an attempt by the GoE to appear "balanced" in the wake of recent arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members. Other sources suggest the Ministry of Interior regards MECA as provocative and capable of stirring religious animosity and possibly violence between Copts and Muslims. They hope that a few weeks in jail will persuade these individuals to adopt a less provocative approach.  
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